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The
American Historical Review

FALLACIES IN HISTORY

NO science has come out of the Atrocious War more discredited than has psychology as taught and practised by the Germans. Until recently the world regarded it as their especial science. They printed numberless investigations into the psychology of the erotic and the neurotic, of the sane and the insane. They thought that in psychology they had the key which would easily open to them dominion over all peoples. The war proved that they were woefully mistaken; their key unlocked to them only the hidden labyrinthine springs of the German people. They thought that their policy of frightfulness would cause foreigners to give up defending themselves in their terror, and to cringe and whimper before the oncrushing Teutonic hosts. That is apparently what the Germans would have done if the situation had been reversed. But the Belgians did not cringe or whimper; the French did not lay down their arms in terror; the staunch and stolid British not only did not feel or act scared, but seemed for a long time to underrate the great peril which threatened them.

This revelation of the utter inability of German psychology to understand any other race except the German, must vitiate their psychological interpretations in history and in biography, which the German *Gelehrten* have been foisting upon us during the last half-century. This is another reason, I think, why we should be on our guard against history that has been made in Germany. Perhaps I may give this warning with more propriety, for I have protested ever since I began to write, more than thirty years ago, against the German method of writing history. I saw that any method which dehumanizes the subject—history—which should be the most human of all, because it deals entirely with human passions, and actions, and motives, and must be concrete, because men and women are not abstractions, was inevitably a wrong method. I saw, too, that the

boasted impartiality of the Germans, was in many cases pure humbug. Whether Mommsen deliberately intended in his chapters on Caesar to glorify the Prussian ideal of despotism under a single despot, that is what he actually arrived at. That von Sybel was the unblushing court historiographer of the House of Hohenzollern was too apparent to be doubted. Treitschke, intellectually the ablest of the modern German historians, and the one among them whose diabolical influence exceeded that of all the rest, was no more or less impartial than is any special pleader of the first rank, trying to befog and convince a jury. On the score of impartiality, therefore, the modern German historians did not greatly impress me; and since the war has disclosed that they, like the other professional men, the teachers, and clergy, in Germany, were simply working to Germanize the world in order to make it an easier prey for German ambition, I have felt it a duty to repudiate them. If we are to raise history to the high place in the regard of men which it should occupy, we must purge it from the corruption which the Germans inflicted upon it. They used it simply as a higher form of the deception practised by the imperial government. But, as our sole end is truth, not the deification of the Hohenzollern dynasty or the worship of Junkers, I repeat my warning: having every reason to distrust German psychology as we have seen it recently applied, we must beware of accepting the interpretation of history and biography as psychologized by modern German historians.

Psychology seems to be, indeed, a dangerous instrument to knowledge. Fascinating it is, beyond question. We might almost call it the chameleon science, because its conclusions are so subjective. Lowell wittily remarked that the reason why everybody supposes that he can find truth at the bottom of a well is that everybody sees his own face there.

A person not long ago endeavored to interpret literature as a manifestation of the Freudian Wish, and he found no difficulty in proving that Longfellow's poem, "I stood on the bridge at midnight", originated in a sexual motif of which Longfellow was unconscious. All that a sane mind can infer from such a statement is that the doctrine of the Freudian Wish is in danger of being overworked by its devotees. Our fathers took great comfort in the Sun Myth, but that too was overworked, and it seems to have scuttled away into the burrow where once fashionable theories hibernate.

In warning against modern German interpretation of history, I do not mean to imply, of course, that the thoroughness and care with which the Germans study history should be discarded. I would

insist, however, that the Germans have no monopoly over thoroughness and care. Every true historian, from Thucydides down, has wished to know the truth, and to tell it, as exactly as he could. We almost define the historian as a man with a passion for understanding an episode, or era, or historic personage, in the past. So far as the German method of study leads to the consideration of human beings as if they were chemical substances, always subject under given conditions to immutable reactions, we must be on our guard. From this fallacy has arisen the idea of the spurious science of history, and with this idea goes the assumption that men are mere soulless machines, pulled hither and thither by mechanical laws in a universe without morals.

In writing history, we shall be as scrupulously impartial as our temperament allows, and that includes not only our passion for telling the truth, but our sense of justice, and love of honesty. Many great historians have not been impartial. Carlyle and Macaulay, the chief British masters in history of the nineteenth century, were plainly unneutral; but their unneutrality was honest, it does not deceive you; indeed it may reveal the truth to you more accurately than drab, dispassionate impartiality could do. The zealot often sees more than a hostile critic can, in a creed or leader, and he feels emotions which are more important than definitions. The sort of partizanship displayed by Carlyle, or Macaulay, or Grote, being honest, has no resemblance to the deliberate attempt to deceive by veiled Prussian propaganda, and to pervert and to corrupt, not less than to deceive, of the modern German writers and teachers of history.

One of the commonest dangers which the historian runs when he attempts to interpret history, comes from the use of *a priori* arguments. Judging from the torrents of reasons which have been poured upon us of late, as to the League of Nations and as to the effects the treaty of peace will produce, one sees only too plainly that the lesson of the war, which should have taught us to beware of *a priori* arguments before everything else, has been lost on us. Consider, for a moment, the golden age of the *a priori* reasoners who flourished in the decade before the Great War. On all sides we observed warlike symptoms. In spite of suggestions and even offers from other nations, to reduce military strength and preparation, Germany brusquely refused, and not merely increased her army, but went into the business of building up a formidable navy. Officially, she showed by her swaggering threats at Agadir, and elsewhere, that she was intent on making war, and delayed only to catch

the most favorable time for beginning. Her publicists, notably General Bernhardi, issued books to influence the passions of the Pan-Germanists, and to demonstrate how easy it would be, if Germany had the will, for her to conquer the world, which was the mission assigned to her by destiny. Two wars, comparatively small in extent but terribly fierce, actually broke out in the Balkans, and yet the A-Priorists kept on singing as sweetly as the sirens their song of peace. Instead of seeing things as they were, they saw theories which they had agreed to accept as real, and which screened them from reality. These vast armaments, they said, are indeed distressing, and cause an awful burden on the peoples and a waste of resources, but the very fact of the vastness of the armies on a war footing is a guarantee of peace. The weapons and machines of destruction had been so perfected that no human armies could, or would, stand up against them. So, by a wonderful irony, the demon of war, in his attempt to make himself irresistible, had virtually made war impossible. Then too, moral and social considerations would preserve peace. The world was becoming better, with such speed that you could almost see it grow in virtue. Charities of all kinds, the desire of the rich to assist the poor, of the strong to comfort the weak, the greater concern on the part of the community to safeguard health, and diffuse pleasures, the development of the sense of mercy towards the suffering even of animals—what did this all indicate, except that the nations would never listen to the proposal to go to war? War was the negation of mercy, charity, justice, even humanity. They assured us that no monarch, no government, could be so wicked as to plunge into this crime. Modern inventions, transportation by sea or land, modern commerce, which enabled the industrial products of one country to be exchanged swiftly with those of another, modern banking and finance, which bound together the stores of capital in all parts of the world in ties so sensitive that they responded to the faintest tick of the telegraph, would veto the first whisper of war. Capital is *solidaire*, capital thrives on peace.

With such assurances, many of which we may suspect issued from German sources, the nations ought to have been lulled, and only too evidently they were lulled—to their own undoing. We lived in the best possible of worlds, in which war could never take place. Nevertheless, war came, a frightful war, an atrocious war, for which history has no parallel. I need not trace the steps which led to the convulsion, but the A-Priorists owe it to mankind to explain how they deduced inviolable peace from conditions which made war inevitable.

Old Oxenstiern's remark on the little wisdom with which the world is governed, might be matched by another on the little foresight of supposed statesmen. Is there any class of experts which displays so much ignorance on concerns of first-rate importance? If you consult an eminent lawyer or doctor, the chances are ten to one that he can give you a valid opinion. Not so the statesman. Take what would seem to be a simple test. Ask him whether war is likely to come within a given time. If he is honest and sagacious he will tell you that he does not know. How shall we qualify Lord Granville, therefore, who at the beginning of July, 1870, announced that the peace of Europe was assured, and that not the smallest threatening cloud could be seen on the horizon; and yet at that very moment Bismarck was working with might and main in order, as he said, by waving the red flag before the Gallic bull to drive him to desperation. Bismarck intended, if he could compass it, that there should be war; but even he could not state with certitude that there would be war, for he could not foresee the preposterous blunders of the French government. The dominating fact of it all was that he was ready to turn to his own advantage any blunder the French might make, and he had behind him the very powerful Prussian army, to strike with at a moment's notice. To know what he wants and to be prepared, are the two indispensable attributes of the real statesman. "If you ask me what will happen within a year, or within a month", said Cavour, in substance, "I cannot tell you; but if you ask me how I would act under any given combination of circumstances, I can tell you." Therein he differed from the doctrinaire, or the shallow observer, like Lord Granville. His saying confirms my belief that the average statesmen constitute the least trustworthy body of specialists; and as we advance in the process of democratization, we find it more difficult to foresee with reasonable clearness what antics the future will play in political affairs.

In earlier times, when the international relations among the countries were determined by monarchs, or by ministers who spoke and acted for the monarchs, it was comparatively easy to predict. England and France had a traditional policy which with occasional variations or digressions directed their mutual relations for many years. No signpost was needed to the attitude which Louis XIV. would take towards Austria. So, in the competition of cunning in which Ferdinand of Spain, the Emperor Maximilian, and the English Henry VII. engaged, we have helpful clues from knowing these respective policies. But to-day, when a parliament or a congress may upset the plans of a country, the penumbra of uncertainty has

broadened. In Congress men often support or oppose a bill for reasons which have nothing to do with the goodness or badness of the bill itself. This is one of the penalties, if you choose so to call it, of democracy; but I believe that in the long run democracy is a better instrument than unchecked autocracy for achieving the high ends of civilization. It adds evidently to the burdens of the statesman, and requires of him faculties which were never looked for in old days. Cavour, Lincoln, Roosevelt, had to persuade Congress to support their measures before they could cause those measures to be accepted by Piedmont, or by the United States. How different the task of Olivares or Richelieu, of Mazarin, or of Metternich.

These thoughts make me view with scepticism many of the assertions, and promises, and demonstrations with which we have been bombarded by the friends and enemies of the League of Nations and the treaty of peace. I hope that my scepticism is healthy and that my suspicion is warranted. But who has a right to be as certain of anything as are those persons who argue so vehemently about every item under dispute? Whatever happens must happen in the future, and we can assert no more about the future than that it some time will be the present. Imagine a drawing-master who should set his pupils to draw and paint the clouds which will form the sunset on some evening next June. This figure insists on rising before me when I listen to the conflicting prognostications. I do not wish to ridicule the habit we all have of building castles in the future. There are certain apparently fixed facts in human nature, and in geography, which we instinctively count on. The sun will rise tomorrow, the seasons will follow each other in their immemorial circuit, and with hardly noticeable variations; but we must not mistake our belief in the permanence of facts like these, for the vague, elastic, and unpredictable combinations in politics. Even a timid man of science, who shudders at any inaccurate statement, may dare to assert that water will never run up hill so long as the earth remains as we now know it; and yet there are prophets so bold that they do not hesitate to say what will be the condition in Dantzic ten years hence, or in Ragusa, or Somaliland.

I know not whether to pity or to envy those who feel their position in the universe so assured! Omniscience must be a delightful delusion for its victim, although it sometimes bores his victims. My own position, I am ashamed to say, is rather that of the spider who spins a long thread from a bough, and swings to and fro, dropping deeper and deeper trying to find bottom, or some other bough to which she may make fast the lower end of her thread. As a result

of this limitation, my scepticism increases as I listen to the champions and to the antagonists of the peace treaty and of the league.

Nevertheless, I firmly believe that there are some principles which, humanly speaking, may be considered immutable. The spirit of righteousness may take different forms in externizing itself, but it does not change. So the loyalty of man to man, friendliness to one's neighbor, self-sacrifice, are abiding elements of human nature, in the same way that iron and gold and oxygen are elements in the chemical world. If you have assembled these in your treaty or your league, nothing can prevent the dawning of the Utopian day; if you have not, you can no more attain peace than you can twist ropes of sand.

After making this confession which casts doubt on our ability to peer far into the future, shall I be charged with inconsistency when I declare that I believe history will become increasingly a vital concern not only to students, not only to intelligent amateurs who by means of a good historical work can wander up and down through the past without leaving their library, just as they can, by means of a good book of travel, explore the earth without fatigue or discomfort, from the tropics to the pole? Is it not discreditable that although we have the political records of the more forward peoples for nearly three thousand years, we have distilled from them no essential knowledge to serve beginners in statecraft? "History never repeats", you may urge; and no doubt all the elements of any event may not be repeated in a later combination, but the gist may be repeated over and over again. A liar may never tell the same lie twice, or with the same results, but it will still be possible for the person who investigates the art of lying to generalize truth from the study of particular lies.

Speaking of puzzles, I am reminded of economics and statistics; which I wish to refer to, however, with the respect to which their great service entitles them, and which an ignoramus ought always to pay to shrines of knowledge into which he has never strayed. The economists have arrived at certain conclusions concerning sumptuary laws, inflation, attempts to fix maximum and minimum scales, the observance of which ought to prevent the recurrence of economic and financial follies and disasters. The old kings of France, when they were hard up, stamped their names on pieces of leather which they forced the people to accept instead of gold and silver coins, a device which merely staved off bankruptcy. Devices equally absurd, though not exactly of the same form, have been practised in the United States in this very year. Why should not we be taught to

profit by the blunders of the past? The inhabitants of a shore where there are dangerous quicksands do not go on, generation after generation, walking into the quicksands; cannot the experience of our forerunners teach us also what to avoid in government and in politics?

Perhaps the reason why history has so seldom been respected as a guide or as a warning, is because it has so seldom laid bare the moral basis of politics. Politicians have chosen to look upon morals as having little or nothing to do with politics. In Germany they carried this notion so far that professors and parsons evolved a system which scoffed at the idea that the state had any business to consider the moral law. Whatever it decided to do was right; and the learned and pious champions of this system so far lost touch with reality that they failed to see that, while the state was an abstraction, the men who governed it were concrete human beings. And these doctrinaires flattered themselves that they had discovered the secret of *Realpolitik*, of "practical politics". But morals are to politics what the rocky bottom is to the stream which flows over it; and when history is so written that it shows not merely the frothy and often confused events that speed away on its surface, but the permanent basis, this will deserve and receive a more serious attention. Then may its generalizations carry real weight; and its truths, which are now embodied in ambiguous proverbs or fantastic folklore, will have definite validity.

Again I must disavow any purpose of advising that moral interpretations be lugged in. We will never let down the bars for those who would inject the Sunday-School-book spirit into the interpretation of history—that spirit which is thrice objectionable: first because it sets up a false world and makes believe that it is true; next because it turns those who write its books into sanctimonious deceivers; and last because it perverts the children who read the books into precocious prigs. Whoever sees life deeply, and has the talent to describe it, will not fail to reveal that it is an affair of more than surfaces; but this revelation is more likely to be made unconsciously than by deliberate intent. To set out to find a purpose is like hunting mare's nests. I remember reading a book of essays by a Shakespeare critic who wished to prove that in each of the plays Shakespeare wishes to unfold a moral design. The critic with dexterity, not to say surprising intellectual sleights, proved his case to his own satisfaction, until he came to *Othello*; he admitted that he was puzzled to justify the killing of Desdemona, for he could not find her charged with any crime that merited capital punishment. At last a beam of

light broke through his critical perplexity. Shakespeare condemned Desdemona to death because she was guilty of miscegenation! Let historians take warning; let them refrain from wedding the false standards of a spurious ethics to the truth of facts. That indeed is miscegenation worthy of death by strangling.

One fallacy which is too old to be called modern has been recently revived and employed in so many places and by so many persons that evidently those who employ it deem it efficacious in spite of its age and of its patent speciousness. We must notice it, therefore, in passing. Its mechanism is as simple as that of a popgun adapted to the use of the smallest boy. The plot, if we may dignify it by that name, runs thus: if the same thing happens to two persons, they must therefore be alike. Lately I heard a publicist of distinction in his community argue that Washington, Jefferson, and Lincoln, had all been outrageously abused and misjudged by their contemporaries; but time has reversed this judgment, and those three are now held in the highest honor. President Wilson is being abused and misjudged by some of his contemporaries; therefore he and Washington and Lincoln are alike, and equal.

Those of us who will not be alive fifty years hence cannot tell what time's immunity bath may do to Mr. Wilson's fame; but while we live we can at least protest against such silly logic, and laugh as we protest. Put it in another form: the lion and the adder have each two eyes; therefore the lion and the adder are similar. Two men rowing in the same canoe are upset and drowned; therefore both have red hair. But why should we be surprised that logic too has gone into the melting pot, in our era of convulsions? Has not everything else? The standards of music, and poetry, and painting, began to crumble years before the war; the ideals of justice, humanity, and righteousness have been thrown overboard, and Bolshevism has been openly preached in this country, and, shame to say, perverted professors and degenerate intellectuals have been its prophets. The gigantic, primeval beast has sloughed off humanity, as a snake sloughs its skin, and we have the aboriginal ego, the remorseless and insatiate self, a creature of claws and fangs and coils, which denies God and right and law, and seeks only the gratification of its lusts and cruelties.

Amid such a dissolution why should logic be spared? Logic is the system of thinking which, in the course of many ages, has been evolved by reasoning men. If you throw it over, you have no common meeting-ground with those who still reason. Logic binds the minds of men together in their processes of thought. It unites ra-

tional thinkers to-day with the thinkers of all the past, and all of its products and ideals. The Bolshevik has voted to abolish God; he might as well abolish the multiplication table, or the binomial theorem about which he hardly knows more than about God. Whirling words unchecked by reason cost nothing, and they create nothing, unless it be chaos. Universal law, which they supposed they had abolished, underlies chaos itself, and will bring back order. Logic, too, refuses to be destroyed; can you destroy the law of gravity, which causes the acorn to drop from the oak, or the cone from the hemlock?

Should not historians, therefore, whose domain is the past, regard themselves as dedicated to defend those great facts and attributes in human nature which have been manifested in the past, and become, so far as we can say this of anything human, permanent? I do not mean fashions in creed, or politics, or society, or art; we may look upon these as we might look upon the voyages of ships to different ports, but the laws of navigation by which each ship steers are the same. So let us resolutely stand by logic and repel every attempt upon it. The instance which I have cited, in which by using false logic President Wilson was raised to the same level as Washington and Lincoln, shows the power of the unthinking to mislead, and of the designing to deceive. President Wilson may be equal or superior to both Washington and Lincoln, but not on the grounds alleged; and it must seriously impair the intelligence of the American people if they are allowed to suppose that such arguments deserve credence.

I shall close this list of fallacies by referring to the prediction which has lately been made that history proper will soon cease to be written or read. Estimable scholars, recognized professionals in the field of history, hold this opinion, and yet I cannot help believing that they are the victims of a fallacy. We shall have, they say, special histories of politics, of society, of finance, of industry, of crimes, of religion, of transportation, and of all the other aspects of life, but there will be no attempt to consider a people, or a nation, as a separate entity having a continuous life of its own. Is this not like saying that there will be no more anatomy, no more study of the human body with the interplay and co-ordination of its various parts and functions, but only a minute investigation of each of those separate parts? Instead of "Anatomy", the titles of monographs will read "Pylorus", "Thyroid Gland", "Clavicle", and each vertebra of the backbone will have its special volume. Do you think this likely? And if it were likely, would it be desirable? If you lop

off all branches of a tree, and, after studying each branch, you study each twig, should you really know the whole tree, having failed to examine its trunk? I think not.

I hold, therefore, that history proper will endure as long as nations and tribes lead a collective life through which runs what we may call a common, consecutive, public plot. From this as a centre may radiate as many separate functions and interests as you choose, and each may have its special chronicles. One who thinks otherwise, and predicts that history will soon be dispersed and lost in its elements, is like one who should devote his life to studying the mouse, and should declare that the order of mammals might be regarded as non-existent.

Having seen through this fallacy, also, we shall not allow ourselves to be entrapped by it.

Thus I have touched on several matters suggested, or made directly pertinent by the recent war, and concerning more or less nearly the relation of history to life. I have attempted throughout to look at the historian broadly and generously, measuring his scope by the reach of his ideals. I do not wish to imply the slightest disparagement to those students and practitioners of history who limit their task to the scrutiny of some minute subject. That, too, is worth while when the tiller makes the plot which he cultivates so much his own, so firm and completely investigated, that nobody can shake his hold on it, and that everybody who follows him can count upon it as an established fact.

But, as ideas are above facts, so interpretation is above information. We must not only catalogue the impressions and events which flow in unending sequence over our consciousness, we must try to discover the meaning of the stream. Even the most rigid agnostic, for whom every path vanishes in the unknowable, sees at least far enough to frame for himself a creed which will serve to guide him through the mazes of the knowable—the actual and known existence which conditions our daily lives. Socrates, too, had his unknowable, but like the wise man he was, it neither discouraged nor frightened him. “If our ship sinks on the ocean of life”, he said, “we must build us a raft, and drift on over the waters, as best we may, but with courage unabated.” Not less valiant, certainly, should be the spirit of historians.

The interpretation I have in mind, will not be quickly found and cheap; it will not be partizan special pleading, under disguise; it will not be Protestant or Roman Catholic, Mohammedan or Jew. Directly or indirectly, it will give tidings of the mysterious life from

which we all spring. As historians grow more subtle they will see more clearly the subtlety of life, and their histories will be more subtle. In our efforts during the past half-century to attain precision and impartiality, two indispensable qualities in every history worthy of the name, we have overlooked other qualities needed in any perfect work. For a while we were told with much stubborn assertion, that it makes no matter how a man writes, or how he presents his facts; if readers can discover all the facts in the historian's dump, his end was achieved. From this came the epigram: "If a book of history is interesting, it is not history." This doctrine of muddle, or slovenly writing, condemns itself, and though some still practise it, none praise it. Speech being the instrument through which human beings exchange thoughts, does anyone maintain that he speaks best who stammers most?

Let "Hospitality" be written over the gate which opens on our great domain of history. Let every worker, if he be earnest and true, be held in honor, and let each work according to his talents and his choice. There must be distinctions—what is life but an unending series of distinctions—there must be great and small, but identity in purpose will bring all into a common equality of friendship.

WILLIAM ROSCOE THAYER.